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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 001366

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SUBJECT: PRESSING GSL FOR CESSATION OF FIGHTING

REF: COLOMBO 1331 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: CDA JAMES R. MOORE FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: SCA PDAS Steven Mann visited Colombo August 16-17 as ground fighting between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) security forces and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) cadres continued in the north and east (ref A). In meetings with President Rajapaksa, Foreign Minister Samaraweera, and Army Commander General Fonseka, Mann delivered three key messages: fighting must stop immediately; there is a rising humanitarian crisis that requires full GSL and military support for NGO efforts; and the GSL must communicate the larger picture. Mann also met with representatives of the LTTE's proxy political party, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), to whom he also stressed the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities.

¶2. (C) Summary cont'd: Government representatives claimed that military action was solely a defensive response to LTTE provocations and pledged a willingness to negotiate as soon as the LTTE curbed violence - although they admitted eyeing an offensive against the strategically important Sampur Peninsula, near Trincomalee Harbor. President Rajapaksa, in a two-hour meeting with Mann, repeatedly emphasized his frustration with LTTE breaches and exploitation of the ceasefire. Hostilities appear likely to continue, with humanitarian aid still an urgent concern. End Summary.

MANN CALLS FOR "BREATHING SPACE"

¶3. (C) Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Mann visited Colombo August 16-17 as fighting between Government of Sri Lanka security forces and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam showed no signs of abating in the north and east (ref A). PDAS Mann met separately with President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, Army Commander General Sarath Fonseka, and two parliamentarians from the Tamil National Alliance, the LTTE's proxy party. PDAS Mann also met with

representatives of the Tokyo Donor Conference Co-chairs (Norway, EU, Japan and US) and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission. In all meetings with GSL officials, PDAS Mann emphasized the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities, pointing out that this is not a diplomatic platitude, but the unambiguous and deeply-held view of Washington: the GSL and LTTE must stop the fighting now. Mann also stressed concern over the rising humanitarian crisis and urged the GSL to give active support to NGOs in their work. He made that point with defense officials and also asked President Rajapaksa to communicate it to the military. Mann also asked all GSL interlocutors to consider where current operational needs fit in the context of greater political considerations and humanitarian concerns: the USG failed to see how the fighting fit with larger strategic goals of the government.

¶4. (C) In separate meetings with pro-LTTE Tamil parliamentarians and GSL military leadership, all of whom were reluctant to consider an immediate ceasefire, Mann outlined the need for a "breathing space", which would allow the GSL and the LTTE to reconsider and take a purposeful look at long-term political goals. TNA member of Parliament (MP) Gajendrakumar Ponombalam argued that in order for the LTTE to renounce violence and become integrated into the political mainstream -- and presumably genuinely embrace the negotiation process -- "the LTTE must trust the GSL." MP Sambandan said, "When one deals with a hard organization like the LTTE, its adversary -- the GSL-- must encourage the LTTE to transform. It can't bring about the LTTE's transformation by deceit. Every action of the GSL causes the LTTE to lose faith."

COLOMBO 00001366 002 OF 005

¶5. (C) In discussing the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities with Foreign Minister Samaraweera, Mann stated USG views that the Sri Lankan military is not prepared to fight a wider war and so continued fighting would rebound against the GSL. He warned as well that the GSL should not overestimate what it could get from the USG in terms of additional assistance. Rather than directly addressing PDAS Mann's comments, Samaraweera catalogued the LTTE's aggressions. Samaraweera laid the blame for the current conflict squarely on the LTTE, which he said began when the LTTE took control of an irrigation canal at Mavil Aru in the east (ref A). Samaraweera posited that the LTTE used action at Mavil Aru to divert GSL forces away from Trincomalee and Jaffna. The government is "reluctantly engaged in defensive action to hold Muttur," he said. Samaraweera argued that the ongoing military operations are only to secure GSL control of areas delineated to it under the CFA. He added that the government was ready to cease hostilities, but could not declare this intent as long as the LTTE continued its military offensive. President Rajapaksa echoed Samaraweera's views on LTTE tactics, saying "this was all started by the LTTE. We are only defending ourselves."

RAJAPAKSA: "WHEN THEY WILL STOP, WE WILL STOP."

¶6. (C) In his meeting with Mann, Army Commander General Fonseka said that from July 26 to August 11 GSL forces had focused on the east and were caught off guard when the LTTE launched an offensive on the Forward Defense Line (FDL) on the northern Jaffna Peninsula. Fonseka would not commit to a cessation of hostilities, saying such an action would threaten the government's control of Jaffna. Fonseka was convinced that with enough effort, the army could repel the Tigers.

¶7. (C) Fonseka and other officials expressed frustration the LTTE had used the CFA period to build up offensive capabilities, and asked what assurances there were that a

new ceasefire would not yield the same result. Mann said that, realistically, such guarantees were not possible. Fonseka said that the military would push on in the current offensive until it takes the LTTE base at Sampur, on the southern coast of Trincomalee harbor.

¶8. (C) In a separate meeting, chief of the Nordic-based Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) Ulf Henricsson assessed that the GSL had planned for a short return to offensive action, optimistic it could win. However, Henricsson said, security forces have "gotten stuck" in heavy artillery from the LTTE. Unfortunately for the GSL, added Henricsson, the LTTE's defenses are too well-hidden to be attacked by airpower; Sampur will have to be taken by a ground battle for which the LTTE is well fortified. "Fonseka will meet mines and machine guns," Henricsson predicted.

¶9. (C) When he met with President Rajapaksa, Mann asked his intentions and said, "Are we looking at an actual war?" The president shook his head no and stated, "I don't want this! I don't want it, but if we are attacked, what am I to do? Am I to give up my Jaffna, my Trincomalee harbor?" Rajapaksa then noted that Israel was taking military action against a terrorist group over the loss of only two soldiers, while Sri Lanka had faced many more casualties at the hands of the LTTE. Referring to the LTTE, President Rajapaksa announced, "When they will stop, we will stop! We don't want to advance. We are one hundred percent sure that without any problem we can go to Elephant Pass, but we don't want to." He said the government will negotiate as soon as the LTTE stops violence.

COLOMBO 00001366 003 OF 005

POSSIBLE NEGOTIATIONS,
ROLE OF NORWEGIAN FACILITATORS

¶10. (C) Despite the evident GSL focus on the ongoing military operations, Foreign Minister Samaraweera stated, "If tomorrow a cessation of hostilities could be declared and we could get the LTTE back to the negotiating table, the government is ready." Samaraweera asked how it would be possible to get the Tigers to commit to such a step. Mann noted that he had urged TNA MPs to deliver the US message that hostilities must cease and said he would reiterate that message when he spoke to the press. In a press conference that evening with twenty-five local and international journalists, Mann called on both sides to cease hostilities, said the LTTE must renounce terrorism, and urged a negotiated solution. Newspapers the following day front-paged his remarks.

¶11. (C) In the meeting with Samaraweera, Mann asked whether the Norwegians might also carry such a message to the LTTE. Samaraweera expressed frustration that Norwegian Special Envoy Jon Hanssen Bauer does not get to speak directly with LTTE leader Prabhakaran. Samaraweera said LTTE political wing leader Tamilselvam "is a parrot who mimics" Prabhakaran, so speaking to him would be futile. In a later meeting, President Rajapaksa said even Tamilselvam, who "meets with everyone", would not meet Hanssen Bauer, but perhaps Hanssen Bauer could begin with overtures to Tamilselvam while former Norwegian Special Envoy Erik Solheim contacted Prabhakaran directly. All GSL interlocutors stressed the need to for the Norwegians speak directly to Prabhakaran, as he alone calls the shots for the LTTE.

¶12. (C) Samaraweera said the Norwegians must persist as facilitators, saying, "We need them now more than ever." President Rajapaksa said his coalition partners (the Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Buddhist monk-based Jathika Hela Urumaya) had demanded that Norway leave because of its "failure." "Yet,

I want Norway, I trust them," Rajapaksa opined. He said he "understands" why the Norwegians "show closeness" and take money to the LTTE on their visits. (Note: Upon making this latter point, the President turned to the note-taker and said, "I didn't say that!" and laughed. End note.)

GSL MUST ADDRESS HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

¶13. (C) While GSL interlocutors noted obstacles to peace, Mann stressed the humanitarian cost of the return to hostilities. He said the military had hindered NGO operations and restricted monitors from accessing conflict areas. Mann told all interlocutors that the military must see NGOs as partners, and asked President Rajapaksa to convey that message to the military, specifically to field-grade and company-grade officers. General Fonseka said NGOs could work without problem in non-conflict zones, but the military could not guarantee NGO workers' safety in high security zones and had therefore restricted NGO access. Fonseka offered GSL assistance in evacuating expatriate NGO staff from Jaffna.

¶14. (C) In all meetings with GSL officials, Mann also pointed out that addressing human rights concerns would enable the US to better make the case with the international community for bolstering efforts to limit LTTE funding and arms procurement: "the more you give us to work with, the better we can do." Foreign Minister Samaraweera thanked Mann for the US initiative in assembling contact groups to address the latter issues, and asked whether Cambodia might be included as a member country since it may be an origin or trans-shipment point

COLOMBO 00001366 004 OF 005

for LTTE weapons. Mann agreed to convey the request to Washington. Mann shared the same message with President Rajapaksa, noting that each time the GSL investigated and prosecuted human rights abuse allegations, it strengthened its image in the international community.

HIGH PROFILE HUMAN RIGHTS CASES

¶15. (C) Two high profile human rights cases -- the murder of 17 local Tamil employees of a French NGO in Muttur, and the GSL air strike against a facility that killed upward of 60 Tamil youth--were discussed in Mann's meetings. Discussing the NGO workers' murders, SLMM chief Henricsson complained that security forces had kept the SLMM out of Muttur to date and hypothesized that evidence would point to security forces having committed the crime. Yet General Fonseka told Mann the LTTE killed the NGO employees, perhaps because they were informants or because the LTTE was "angry that Tamils were helping Muslims in that area." President Rajapaksa also accused the LTTE of the murders, telling Mann that the LTTE may have given the NGO workers guarantees of safety, then turned on them when they criticized the Tigers. Foreign Minister Samaraweera, too, accused the LTTE of the NGO workers' murders, adding that "the government is determined to investigate and absolve itself."

¶16. (C) The second incident, an August 13 GSL air strike on a facility in the east that killed over 60 Tamil youth, has been manipulated by both sides in conflicting accounts. The pro-LTTE website TamilNet alleges that the site of the bombing was an orphanage; the GSL counters that the facility was a training ground for LTTE cadres. SLMM chief General Ulf Henricsson concurred with the GSL version of events, speculating that the bombing may have been an attempt to kill LTTE leader Prabhakaran. Henricsson told Mann an SLMM monitor visited the site just after the bombing, and the monitor confirmed that 16 bombs had fallen

on and around the target. The monitor saw at least 19 bodies in a nearby hospital; the deceased were predominantly females, aged approximately 16 to 19, some with short hair cut in the style of LTTE cadres.

¶17. (C) President Rajapaksa told Mann that as soon as he heard of the attack on the "orphanage," he called his brother Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa and asked whether the reports were true. The defense secretary and others assured the president the target was an LTTE training facility. The president said he saw video footage of the site featuring people discussing whether Prabhakaran was on the premises. Mann posed the question of whether the bombing worked to the GSL's benefit in the larger context of finding a long-term solution. The president replied that the facility had been poised to send more LTTE cadres out to fight. Mann asked whether there was a real possibility Prabhakaran might have been at the bombed facility, and President Rajapaksa nodded yes.

PRESIDENT RAJAPAKSA:
UNIQUE VIEWS FROM THE TOP

¶18. (C) As with other GSL interlocutors, Mann asked President Rajapaksa how operational necessities fit in with broader strategic considerations. The fighting appeared to have been at a time and place of the LTTE's choosing and he failed to see how the government was integrating the battles, together with political, human rights, and NGO considerations into a larger strategic vision. The president replied, "I give you this: I am ready for human rights investigations." He said from 1968-1970, he had been a "human rights activist" when everyone in the Foreign

COLOMBO 00001366 005 OF 005

Ministry was "against" him. As an example of his humanitarian concern, he cited lifting the curfew imposed on Jaffna August 12, noting that he staggered the lifting of the curfew in three-hour blocks around the peninsula because his military advisors warned that the LTTE would use the time to transport weapons. Mann pointed out that the staggered curfew made it difficult for civilians to move from one district to another to buy food. The president did not respond directly, but said the LTTE planned to drive refugees out of the area and into India in a bid to get the Indian government involved in the conflict.

¶19. (C) At several other points in the course of his two-hour conversation with Mann, President Rajapaksa did not answer questions directly, but changed the topic to tangential issues. When Mann asked about the potential for a negotiated settlement, Rajapaksa railed against the LTTE murder of Kethesh Loganathan, deputy head of the GSL Peace Secretariat. Rajapaksa did not address the potential

SIPDIS
content of such a settlement. Incredibly, Rajapaksa argued that the Sinhalese are a persecuted minority. He said, "People think Prabhakaran represents a minority group. The Sinhalese are a minority in the world. The Tamils have 60 million world-wide. They are trying to oppress us!"

COMMENT

¶20. (C) The powerful message that emerged from the two hours with the President was that Rajapaksa feels stung by LTTE assertiveness under cover of the ceasefire and is using the instant outbreak of fighting to hit back at the insurgents. There is, however, no thoughtful consideration of the broader issues. In every meeting with GSL officials, Mann reiterated and rephrased the same question

in a variety of formulations: "Where do current military actions fit in with long-term strategic goals?" Not a single GSL interlocutor was able to provide a direct or satisfactory answer, confirming that Colombo's focus is strictly operational at present. The president, for his part, said he feels attacked in a variety of ways: physically by the LTTE, through Tiger propaganda, and as a member of the Sinhalese "minority" in the global picture. That calculus, coupled with the defense establishment's assessment that its forces can prevail, makes it unlikely that the GSL will cease hostilities at this time. The GSL lacks the will and the strategic vision to seek a negotiated settlement and feels that politically it has no space to do so. For its part, the LTTE shows no signs of backing away from the current conflict either. The GSL's stance is not unreasonable: the Tigers have exploited the ceasefire to strengthen their military position; they have undertaken a series of brazen assassination operations in the capital and elsewhere during the period of the ceasefire; they have been much less engaged in the negotiations than the GSL. We understand Rajapaksa's frustrations. Still, the lack of an integrated strategy and of any vision beyond a short-term one will only complicate the GSL's prospects.

MOORE